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ABSTRACT

This paper examines two themes pertaining to children of incarcerated parents in Norway. The first is the visiting room of a Norwegian prison. The paper briefly describes conditions in and provides photographs of the children's corner of the visiting room at Norway's Oslo Fengsel Prison. The corner was established in 1998 with toys and fresh paint to facilitate children's visits with their fathers, but recent visits revealed a lack of care by prison officials for the area. The second is "Families in Trouble, What Do We Tell the Children? And What Is Right To Say?" The paper briefly describes a workshop and prison project to help children and fathers cope with parental imprisonment. (EV)

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What's New in the Children's Corner in OF (Oslo Fengsel [Prison])?

Anne Berte Haagensli

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XXIII World Congress of OMEP
Organizing Commission
Paper to the World Congress 2001; Family rights and duties. Abstract: 1. What's new in the children's corner in OF (Oslo Fengsel(prison)) in Norway?
2. Problem families – What do we tell the children? And do we educate professionals to handle this?

1. **What's new in the children's corner in OKF (prison) in Oslo?**

   - I have been interested in the subject matter children visiting their inmate fathers in prison for many years. We have done a lot, in the one prison where I have my daily work at the school, to take care of the children in the visitors room. They have their own corner with toys, and we have got a teacher to came twice a year to look after the place and check if something is broken and to set up a list of what we as professionals think would be nice to have in this room. Then the prison administration give the money.

     This autumn we (the prison) were visited by an old lady, a famous writer, specially for children; Anne-Cath. Vestly. She is well known all over Norway with her stories about Ole-Alexander Fili-Bom-Bom-Bom and all the others she has written about in the last 50 years. Always writing about children and the real problems they are meeting every day. The last book is about four boys telling each other a secret. One of the boys father is in prison, and she wanted to look herself inside a prison, and then I met her

2. **Families in trouble, what do we tell the children? And what is right to say?**

   - The other theme that concerns me, is how and what and when we tell children about tragedies in the family. Specially when the father goes to prison. What is right to say? And who has the right to tell them? And when and where do we ought to tell the children? In Norway we have a group of people working with the problems the family gets when a member of the family ends up in custody. FFP(prisoners family group) have mostly been interested in the family and the grown up problems. Now, after we in OMEP have pointed at the problem, they have started to talk about the young children. And now we in the Norwegian OMEP are invited to a seminar about this theme; captives child, children as relative- experience from psychiatry, and two mothers will tell about their own experience.
   - I will put forward a summary about how the situation is in Norway today. Which sort of help may the children get from the community? And how are the family supposed handle the kindergarten and the school?

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1.
Introduction; What's new in the children's corner in OKF (prison) in Oslo?

Play on the inside, play experiences of young children visiting their inmate fathers in custody.
I have been studying this subject in tree years now, and it was the first year, of course we saw most results. It was in the year 1998 that we got a lot of money to buy toys and the visiting room was painted in light yellow and the whole room was so nice! The next year we got 7 pictures showing children playing, black and white photography, framed and placed on the wall in the visitors room and it looks so nice and makes a good atmosphere. And we got a lot of children's drawings to decorate the reception. Hoping that this would create a better impression and present the first meeting with the prison in a better light.

In January 1999 **107** children visited their fathers in custody **68** times.
In January 2000 **44** children visited their fathers in custody totally. The officers compile this statistic.

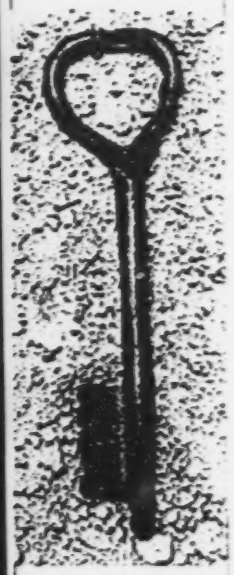
I am sorry to tell, but it is impossible to look at these counting and get a correct summary, because half the cells was empty caused renovation. In July I will have the counting for 2001, and I hope this will clear up a bit. But we have heard that children's response are very good, they like to come to this visiting room much better than in other prisons, they tells the officers. The children's corner is very popular. Both children and their inmate fathers in custody like to be in the children's corner playing together. Some of the children are visiting their inmate fathers two or three times a week. The officers too like to see the children playing when they are visiting and sometimes many children are together playing in the children's corner.

Basis of development and expansion

When we started trying to make a fine, delicate place where children could play when visiting their fathers, the general aim of the project was to support the creation of a good meeting in the visiting-room for small children. We hoped to aim to create an awareness among the fathers of the importance of play activities in the development of their children. By involving the fathers and mothers in this way, we hoped to give them a better understanding of the need for and importance of play in the children's emotional, physical and intellectual development. We also hoped to give them a comfortable memory and a pleasant feeling and something nice to talk about and then they may be would dare to tell others about the visit.
But it is still many men in custody who does not see their children for many months or years, and officers are not talking about it. A young man told me he did not know were his daughter was, he wrote a letter, but told me later that he did not send it because he did not know the address. I told him to talk to the priest.

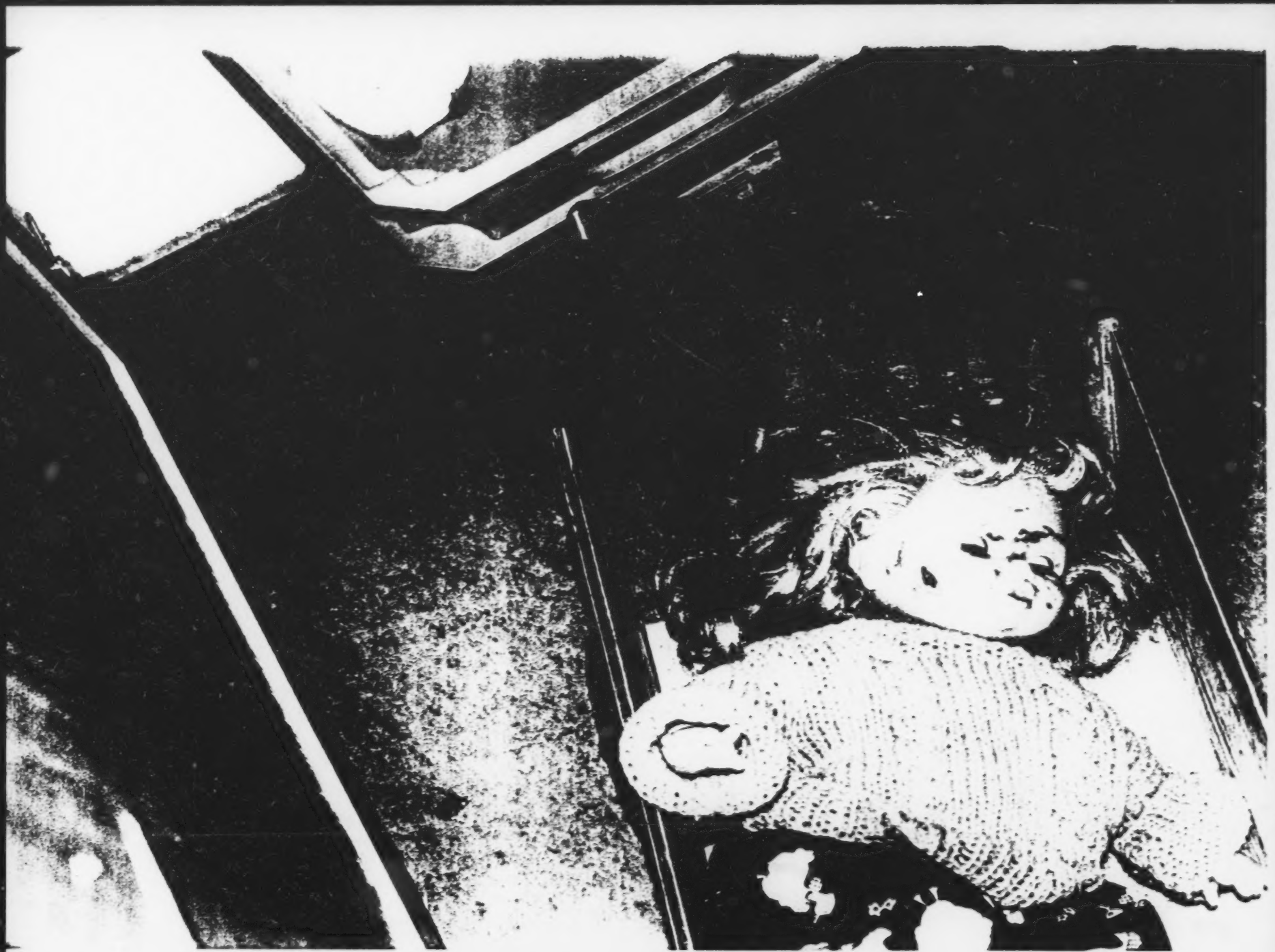
We want to do something because we know this has been an unspoken part of children's life. This experience, not to know were your dad is, is a kind of loss, and losses can trigger grief in young children. Fortunately this theory, not to speak about troubles, now belongs to the past, and we are now asking ourselves how children grieve and how parents can understand children's grief.

Picture 1 and 2; text "before"



Visiting room

- Once I were asked; how is the situation for small children visiting their fathers? And then I were interested!
- When I first saw a visitors room, to look for the children's place, I saw a shelf with dirty sheets and some toys
- I asked, who have the responsibility and who buying these things – the officers themselves takes it with them from home
- Its nice, but it is not professional, and these children needs more than leftover toys!



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taifho
RASKT, LISTIG OG
UTFORDRENDE!
LUDO
Ravensburger

Young children have problem to grasp what has happened, but they pick up concrete facts given by parents and other adults, for example by looking at photograph albums or video films, or by going to the prison itself.

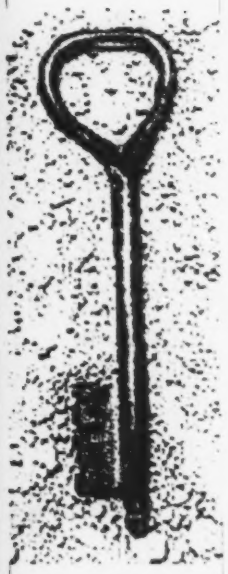
Others who comes to prison are impressed when they discover the cozy play-corner in the visitor-room. How do I know? Because I met one!
This autumn we (the prison) were visited by an old lady, a famous writer, specially for children; Anne-Cath. Vestly. She is well known all over Norway with her stories about Ole-Alexander Fili-Bom-Bom-Bom and all the others she has written about in the last 50 years. Always writing about children and the real problems they are meeting every day. The last book is about four boys telling each other a secret. One of the boys father is in prison. She, the author, wanted to look inside a prison herself, and then I met her. In the book the story goes on about how to tackle this enormous problem and how friends helps each other when life is difficult. An other secret in the book is about homosexuality. She liked the work The Norwegian OMEP had done for the children coming here in the visitors room. And now she has given the prison one of each book to the children's corner and the bibliotheca got her biography! So now we have to ask for money to buy a bookshelf too.

Summary and Future hopes

When we started we worked to make a fine, delicate place were children could play when visiting their fathers in custody. We wanted them to have a good and harmonious a time as possible. We hoped this would help to establish a better family relationship and a stimulating situation which would allow children the opportunity to initiate communication, a process starting at birth and lasts for a lifetime. All activity has to be developed by playing, which must not be forced, but left to the child's choice. As mentioned before, the ideas presented aimed to create an awareness among the fathers of the importance of play activities in development of their children, to help to start a communication situation

But today we have discovered a quite new problem, the toys are swiped together, brushed aside and no one seems to know how to keep it clean and orderly. All teachers know that this follow up is an important point in a public institution. We learned that very little is done in Norway to educate officers why it is so very important to help inmate to have a good relationship to their own children, family and friends. The officers do not think or believe that this is their work, they are focusing on security. So we have to increase our own work. Two visiting a year is not enough, may be we have to came once a month to look after the place and check if something is broken and to renew toys. I hope we will find a teacher to do this work for us (free)!

Picture 3 and 4; after the Norwegian Omsp had been there tidying up.



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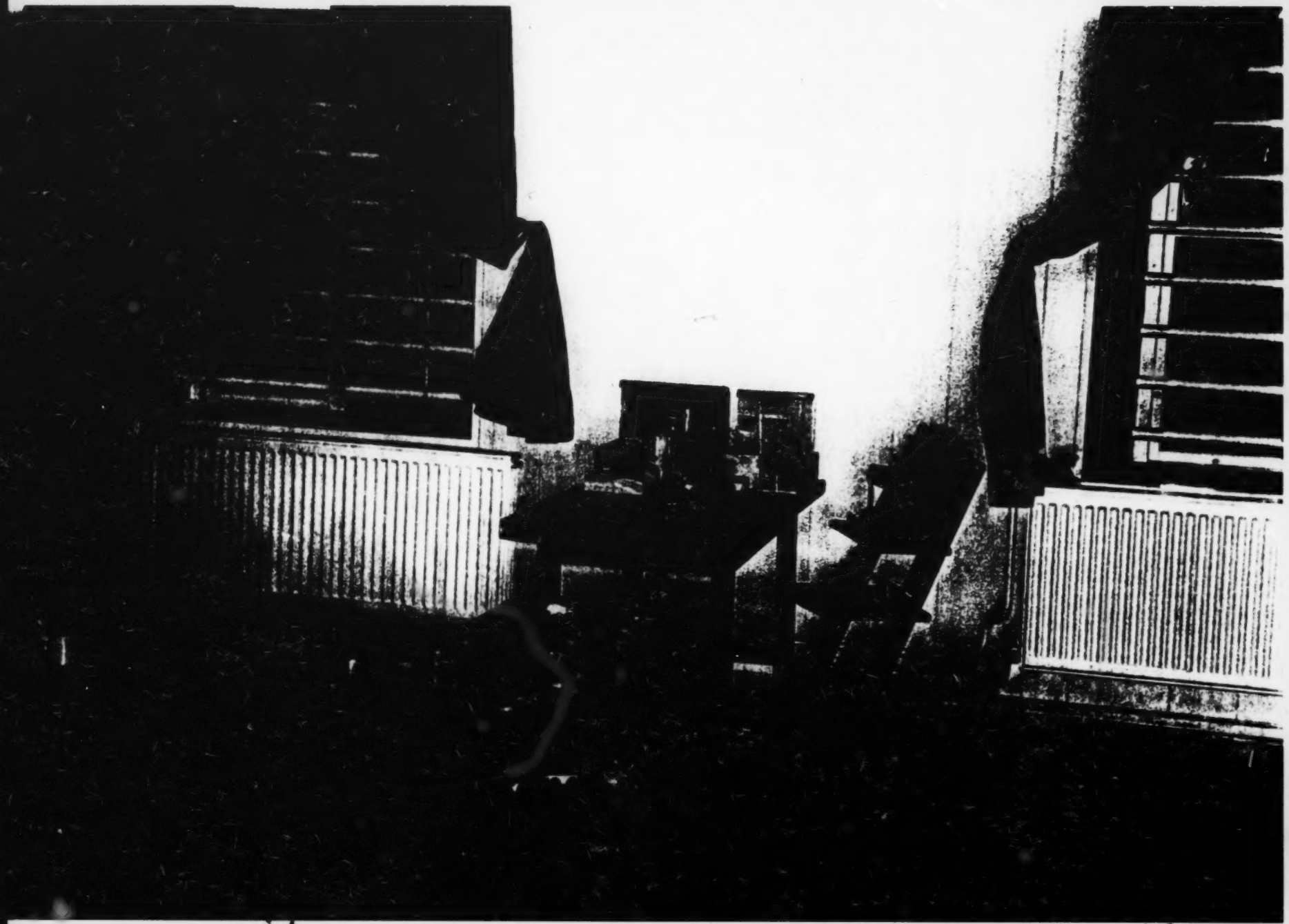

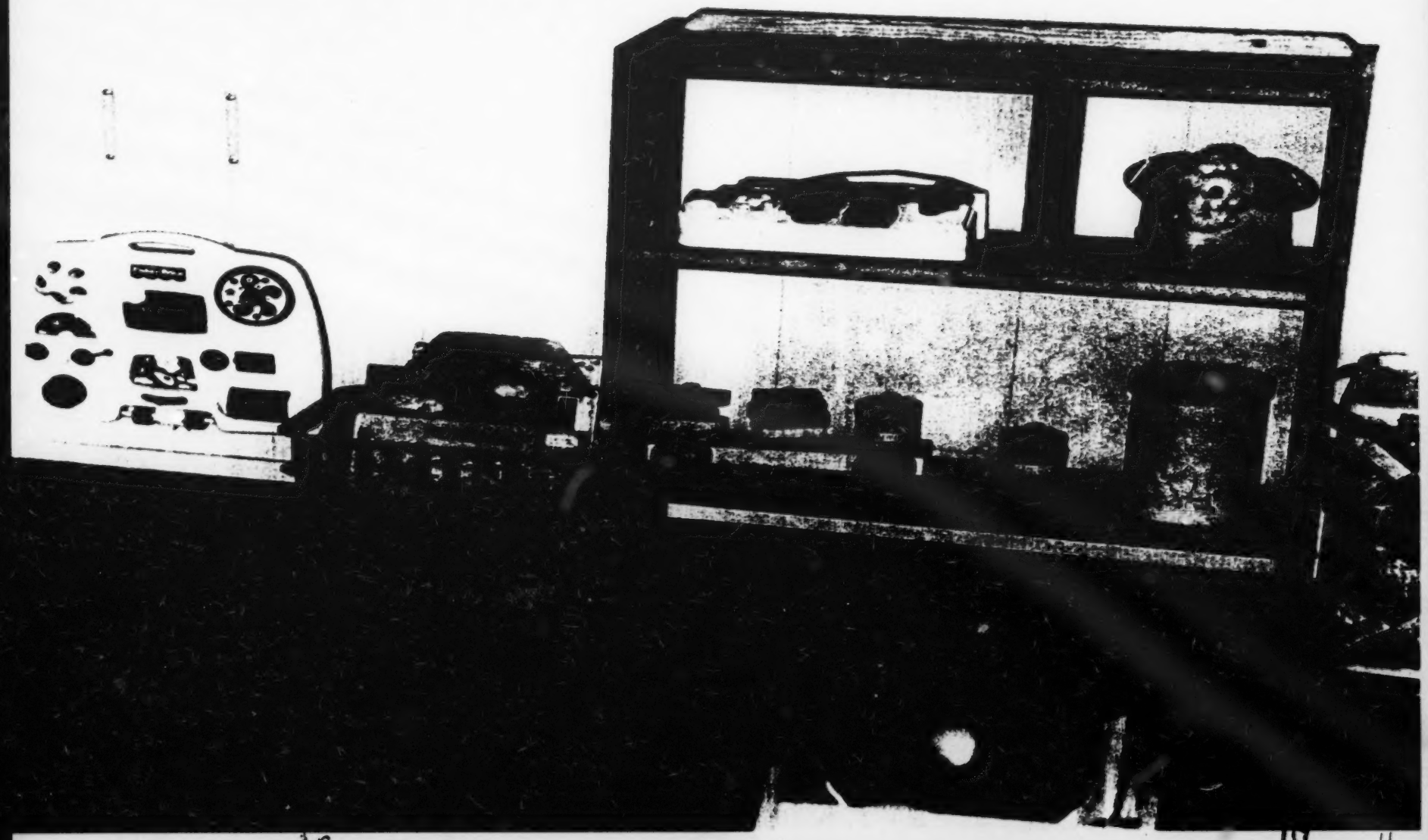

2. Introduction

Families in trouble, what do we tell the children? And what is right to say?

The other theme that concerns me, is how and what and when we tell children about tragedies in the family. Specially when the mother or father goes to prison. What is right to say? And who has the right to tell them? And when and where do we ought to tell the children? In Norway we have a group of people working with the problems the family gets when a member of the family ends up in custody. FFP(prisoners family group) But they have mostly been interested in the grown up peoples problems. Now, after we in OMEP have pointed at the problem, they have started to talk about the young children. And now we in the Norwegian OMEP were invited to a seminar about this theme; captives child, children as relative- experience from psychiatry, and then families told about their own experience.
I will put forward a summary about how the situation is in Norway today. Which sort of help may the children get from the community? And how are the family supposed handle the kindergarten and the school?

Workshop about "what is right to say, how and when do we tell children about tragedies?"
In cooperation with FFP(union for imprisoners families), Redd Barna, barnevernet, Barneombudet, Voksne for Barn, Barne- og familiedepartementet og Justisdepartementet, the Norwegian OMEP arranged a workshop. We invited psychiatrists, psychologists, officers working in prison, and some with family-relationships with criminals, in fact two mothers.
Principal Elin Kufås from Blakstad psychiatric hospital shared experience from her project "Patients has also children".
Dr. philos Pär Nygren talked about the departments explanation about children with parents in custody.

In 1995 Redd Barna in Sweden started a project and in 1998 wrote a book because they had got a letter: "Dear Redd Barna. We are twenty inmates of a prison who wander if you can help us to start a fathers group here in the institution..." And Mie Melin wrote "Prisoners children" in 1998. Here we can read about hidden, forgotten children and much tears. Do they, the criminals, care about their children? Oh, yes. And what happened the day the police came home to fetch their father? What did the child see or hear? And what did they do with the sorrow, the family? Did they get some help? It is reading that takes you into a life you would not believed existed, if you don't know it yourself.
The conclusion is that the whole family need to be together more than one or two hours to get time to speak together and with the children, a week-course is a fine method to learn about how to tackle everyday difficulties, and it is important to meet other families in the same situation. They started a family trainee course, to try to help families to overcome the new problems that they met when one in the family was imprisoned.

This year, we started such a project in Norway, were only inmate fathers are together to try to take their part of the responsibility for their own children. They are educated and helped to plan a new life with work and a flat and so on. The demand of the society is no more narcotics or criminality. If they fail to fulfill the demands of society, they miss the opportunity to stay in the group.

Some of the officers in these group were at the workshop telling that the work was much more interesting because they saw inmate who worked to try to survive as no criminals, and they believed that it helped many people. It is not sure that they will move into the family again, but they wants to take their part of the upbringing, and they have got something to live for.

Future challenges/ Summary

In Norway we have started to talk about how important it is from the point of the child to have good relationships with both parents even if they are criminals. It is not always the best for the child to live with parents if their problems are too difficult for themselves to handle, but we have to talk about it.
The worst thing for a young child, is not to understand what going on. They observe that daddy disappear, and then they may start to fantasy about why. Some believe it is their fault, they feel guilty. Others starts to improvise and gets figments and these losses can trigger grief in young children.
It is not one answer or one way to tackle these problems, but we have to talk together. One prison, Ullersmo, have started a project were young fathers learn how to get a good relationship with their young children. Not necessarily to live together in the future, but to manage to be a good father.
So, may be, and I hope soon, we will get this thema in the officers education, too.

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